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## ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 1990s, education in South Africa was in turmoil and experienced a major crisis. Adding to the crisis were problems such as major inequalities in South African society where the majority of people were marginalized and forced to live in a disenfranchised society. Educational change was required to provide equity in terms of educational provision and to promote a more balanced view of South African society. The newly democratic African National Congress government has striven to root out apartheid education and to create a new vision of empowered citizens for South Africa. Against this background, outcomes-based education (OBE) was chosen in 1997 as the most likely educational model to address the crisis in South African education; the most likely system to operate at all educational levels; and the most likely model to address the issue of quality (and inequality) in South African education. This approach or model was chosen not only to emancipate learners and teachers from a content-based mode of operation, but also to respond to international trends in educational development. In March 1997 the Education Minister announced in the British parliament the launch of Curriculum 2005. Has the introduction of outcomes-based education really transformed South African education and empowered the marginalized and disenfranchised post-apartheid South African society? The paper provides background on outcomes-based education, considers the issue of quality in education, and discusses OBE, quality, and reform in South African education. It suggests a way to implement Curriculum 2005. (BT)

# The Introduction of a System of OBE in South Africa: Transforming and Empowering a Marginalized and Disenfranchised Society.

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# **The Introduction of a System of Obe in South Africa: Transforming and Empowering a Marginalized and Disenfranchised Society**

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

During the beginning of the last decade of the previous century, education in South Africa was in turmoil and experienced a major crisis. This crisis was characterized by, among other things, the provision of equal access to schools, unequal educational opportunities, irrelevant curricula, inadequate finances and facilities, shortage of educational materials, the enrollment explosion, inadequately qualified teaching staff, high drop-out and failure rates, examination orientedness with a major emphasis on learning by rote as well as unimaginative teaching methods. Adding to this crisis were problems such as major inequalities in South African society where the majority of South Africans were marginalized and were forced to live in a disenfranchised society.

Taking all these factors into consideration, change was required in South African education. The attitudes and values of most of the adult South Africans of this decade were formed in the apartheid era. As a result of the divisions which existed during this era, learners were not always taught to appreciate the different aspirations and perspectives of people from whom they were distanced. Educational change was required to provide equity in terms of educational provision and to promote a more balanced view of the marginalized South African society.

The newly democratic elected ANC government has, for reasons which can be well understood, been striving to root out apartheid education and to coin a new vision of empowered citizens for the future South Africa. Seen against this background, outcomes-based education or OBE, as a model, was chosen as the most likely to address the crisis in South African education. It strives to improve the quality of education in South Africa (i.e., to guarantee success for all; to develop ownership by means of decentralized curriculum development; to empower learners in a learner-centered ethos; and to make schools more accountable and responsible in trying to ensure success and effectiveness).

The formulated outcomes of the model underscore the above aspects and emphasize the development of critical, investigative, creative, problem-solving, communicative and future-oriented citizens. Outcomes-based education, without the shadow of a doubt, constitutes a radical break with the previous education approaches of the Apartheid South Africa.

In 1994 South Africa experienced its first democratic election. Prior to this election, the country was ruled by a white minority which made up one-fifth of the total population. All facets of education were arranged according to the dictates of the system of apartheid, so this meant that people of the different race groups were provided for in terms of their racial identities. This arrangement received greater refinement when the Black population was divided into separate linguistic groups and were allocated geographical space for occupation based on the languages that they spoke. Such geographical space was conceptualized as so-called Independent States within apartheid vocabulary and the aim, in keeping with the dictates of apartheid policy, was to fragment the Black population as much as possible so as to prevent the formation of a single Black identity which could then be consolidated into a single Black opposition.

When the new democratically-elected government assumed political power in 1994, they inherited, besides all the other legacies of apartheid, an education system consisting of 14 different and independent departments which had to be consolidated into a single national entity. The quality of education offered under the apartheid system with its 14 different and independent departments

(specifically to Black learners in the Independent States) was of a very poor quality and lacked effectiveness.

In the beginning of 1997 the Ministry of Education, under the newly elected ANC government, took the bold initiative to introduce outcomes-based education as the most likely system to operate at all levels of South African education and to address the issue of quality (and inequality) in South African education. This approach or model was not only chosen to emancipate learners and teachers from a content-based mode of operation, but also as a response to international trends in educational development. There are other reasons for the implementation of the OBE model as well, but the above mentioned encapsulates the general thinking behind the introduction of a system of outcomes-based education in South Africa.

On March 24, 1997 the former South African Minister of Education announced in parliament the launch of Curriculum 2005. This was an important public milestone in a process that began about two years earlier, and was planned to continue at least until the year 2005 with increasing teacher input and feedback as the new ideas took hold. This legislation was seen by many citizens, educators and politicians as one of the most controversial changes in the history of South African education and is probably the most significant curriculum reform in the history of South African education. Jansen and Christie commented on the importance of this new development in education by saying: *“It goes right to the heart of the ongoing process of transforming this country into a democracy and shedding the legacy of apartheid”*.

Deliberately intended to simultaneously overturn the legacy of apartheid education and move the country into this new Millennium, it was an innovation both bold and revolutionary in the magnitude of its conception. As the first major curriculum statement of a democratic elected government, it signalled a dramatic break from the past. No longer would the curriculum shape and be shaped by narrow visions, concerns and identities. No longer would it reproduce the limited interests of any one particular group at the expense of another. It would bridge all, and encompass all. Education

and training, content and skills, values and knowledge: all would find a place in Curriculum 2005. This was seen as the first step in transforming and empowering a disenfranchised and marginalized South African society.

This new curriculum model drew on a variety of current ideas and trends in the international arena and reshaped them to fit local conditions. Included amongst these was that of outcomes-based education. The underlying philosophy of Curriculum 2005 is an outcomes-based approach to education and learning which, in simple terms, means clearly focussing and organising everything in an educational system around what is essential for all learners to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for learners to be able to do, then organising curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens.

But has the introduction of a system of outcomes-based education really transformed South African education and empowered the marginalized and disenfranchised post-apartheid South African society? These aspects will consequently be dealt with in this paper.

## **2 THE ISSUE OF OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION (OBE)**

The outcomes-based education model is based upon tenets which can be regarded as controversial. Its implementation in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States was not without problems. However, the model of outcomes-based education has, despite an adverse press in South Africa, a relatively successful track record in other countries. OBE is currently practiced (in many cases with some success but not without a lot of criticism) in some school systems of the above mentioned countries as well as in many other countries around the world who face problems in mass education similar to those of South Africa. It must also be emphasized that the system is not the universally accepted model across these countries mentioned.

The OBE system originated from the United States. Around ten years ago educationists in the US realized that its schooling system was producing too few high performing maths, science and technology learners and that basic literacy was falling. As each state in the US does, to a significant degree, implement its own educational system, some states did not consider OBE, while other states either rejected, modified or accepted OBE as the norm.

The concept of outcomes-based education began with a good, commonsense idea, namely that the quality of education should be judged by focusing on learner outcomes or results. This means that OBE is primarily concerned with focusing on what learners actually learn, and how well they learn it (measured academic results) and not on what learners are supposed to learn (particularly learner performance as measured in a chronologically-oriented time frame against a 'normative' standard). This concept represents a shift from the traditional paradigm (i.e., *when* learners are supposed to learn is most important) to the OBE paradigm (i.e., *whether* learners learn something *well*, rather than when they learn it, is most important). This idea challenges the decades-old conventional wisdom that gauges education quality by inputs and process, by professional intentions and efforts, the characteristics of physical institutions and services, and what levels of financial resources are devoted to the educational enterprise. According to the principles of outcomes-based education such gauges tell us little about the quality of education and about what learners actually learn in the classroom.

OBE is a learner-centered approach where the emphasis is not on what the teacher wants to achieve, but rather on what the learner should be able to know, to understand, to demonstrate and to become. Teachers and learners focus on certain predetermined results or outcomes which are to be achieved by the end of each learning process. These outcomes are determined by relevant real-life needs and ensure an integration of knowledge, competencies, and orientations needed by learners to become thinking, competent and responsible future citizens.

### 3 THE ISSUE OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION

Quality is an issue which cannot be avoided in education at present. A worldwide trend embraces an approach which stresses the development aspect of quality rather than control. Quality has therefore become the buzz-word in educational circles as schools are subject to ever-increasing scrutiny. The issue or concept of quality in education refers, inter alia, to factors such as learners' achievements, teaching approaches and the nature (i.e., physical, cultural and social) of the school. Quality in the classroom also raises issues such as the aims, goals and means of teachers and learners.

Quality, however, is one of those terms that is not easy to define or measure. A single definition of quality in education does not exist. Most people, if asked their definition of quality, would use terms such as 'usefulness' or 'goodness' or 'luxury' or 'efficiency' or 'effectiveness' or 'measuring up' or 'improving output'. However, all these terms are subjective and provide no basis for the measurement of quality. A number of different definitions of quality are used in quality management. A popular one is "Conformance to Requirements which the customers expect". Customers (or clients) are defined as anyone inside or outside (i.e., internal as well as external) the organization receiving a service from another. A product or service either conforms to the requirements or it does not.

However, when the construct of quality is considered in terms of how it applies in multiple settings (such as in an educational context), the picture becomes more complex. In cross-national work on educational quality indicators, researchers working in many different countries (some simultaneously in multiple settings) struggle to achieve reasonable consensus on what 'quality in education' actually means.

Dimmock identified three elements that can improve quality in education, namely the teacher, the learner and the curriculum while Murgatroyd linked education with the aspect of quality assurance, and defined quality in education accordingly. In terms of quality, he stated, "*schools need to*

*examine and assess aspects such as their reliability, competence, responsiveness, accessibility, credibility, durability, performance and perceived quality”.*

In South Africa, public examination results are the main performance indicators of schools. Schools with the highest number of passes are reported in the public media. While this practice may seem to be motivating, teaching for examinations (i.e., teaching the syllabus content only) may deny learners the opportunity to access the breadth of knowledge associated with education. This is most often the case with traditional, content-based curricula, where memorizing knowledge for examination purposes is emphasized, instead of acquiring skills and focusing on processes. In this regard the teacher remains the key person who can maintain efficiency and effectiveness while facilitating the development tasks related to examinations.

#### **4 OBE, QUALITY AND REFORM IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION**

Research has consistently shown that South African learners lack substantial problem-solving and creative abilities. Curriculum 2005 and the OBE model were adopted by government to address, among other things, these shortcomings and consequently to improve the quality of South African education. The OBE model was chosen, accepted and introduced because the emphasis in the new Curriculum 2005 is specifically on aspects such as problem-solving, creativity and, most importantly, the acquisition of skills and attitudes that will “*aim at producing thinking, competent future citizens*”.

Seen in this way, the new OBE model can most probably be regarded as a possible cure for the lack of quality in South African education, as long as it is implemented in a realistic manner, giving schools (and teachers) ownership of both the content of the curriculum and the process of implementation. In short, the new system is both ambitious and visionary, but not always realistic in what can be achieved in a short span of time. In the long run, however, Curriculum 2005 could do

much to improve the quality of education and transforms South African education. By introducing the new curriculum, doors of opportunity may be opened for learners whose academic or career paths have (previously) been blocked. My contention is that learners may be emancipated if they engage rationally, reflectively and imaginatively in educational discourse, what OBE advocates assume such an approach to education could achieve.

To emphasize the advantages of the OBE model for the improvement of quality in South African education even further, it can be mentioned that all three of Dimmock's elements of quality namely improving the standards of teaching performance, improving the standards of learning performance and providing a curriculum more relevant to learners' needs can be seen as present in the current system of OBE in South Africa. The last element for the improvement of quality in education, however, is of particular importance for the South African education scenario where the introduction of a new curriculum is regarded as the possible cure for the lack of quality in South African education. Therefore this element of Dimmock's definition is perhaps the most salient of the three to the context of the introduction of OBE in South Africa. Recalling that OBE was constituted in the dynamically democratizing context of post-apartheid South Africa to aid in the national and individual need for the production of an increasingly skilled work force, it is clear that 'providing a curriculum more relevant to learner needs' would be the *sine qua non* of quality for South African education.

It is furthermore worth noting that it is only an assumption that a politically transformed South Africa means necessarily other forms of transformation, one of which should be education. Systems or models do not change overnight. Many of the state functionaries as well as teachers under the old regime still retain positions of powerful decision-making within the new dispensation. New cadres trained under the old education system are still locked into a Eurocentric-specific paradigm. As Jeevanantham had put it: "*As things stand, our educators, merchants of hope, have the moral responsibility to take the challenges and circumstances beyond the gridlock of internationally-grounded curricular and instructional practices*".

Bill Spady was among the most powerful in shaping the ideas around a possible relationship between OBE and quality in South African education. Spady's appeal lay in the schemata he produced to distinguish between, amongst other things, 'traditional OBE', 'transitional OBE' and 'transformational OBE.' Traditional OBE encompassed negative elements of education such as rote learning and content-based knowledge, while transformational OBE emphasized the opposite: learning shaped by outcomes, integrated knowledge and an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. Spady's ideas regarding the relationship between OBE and quality fell on fertile ground in circles responsible for developing OBE in South Africa, although some did criticize his views by finding more appeal in concepts of the negotiated character of curriculum and the influence of the multi-dimensionality of educational practice and contexts of practice.

The impact of OBE, these critics would argue, can not be equal in unequal conditions. There has been little recognition of this reality of South African educational life or acknowledgment of the additional requirements for successful implementation in resource-poor schools. Now, even Spady is finding that in implementation, his ideas have taken an unrecognizable form in what he calls "*South African OBE*" and "*a gross distortion and deviation from the original ideas*". Whitman and Lai agreed in theory with Spady when they say that "*quality in the school may not be a universal trait and hence [teachers] must take into account the socio-cultural setting in which they teach*". This factor has to be considered with regard to OBE and quality, specifically in respect to a culturally diverse nation such as South Africa.

Despite the overall optimism regarding the new curriculum as portrayed so far in this article, South African education is slowly awakening to the fact that political ideals seldom match classroom realities. The most dramatic evidence of this realization came in the wake of the Chisholm Report of the Curriculum 2005 Review Committee which created a potential political crisis for a government that has made major ideological investment in the new curriculum. The response of the Minister of Education on receiving the report is insightful: "*It is our duty to review on an ongoing basis the new*

*curriculum and its implementation so that we can establish whether it truly results in learning gains for our learners and improvement in the quality of South African education”.*

The reality is that there are some major problems with the implementation process of the new curriculum in South Africa of which the inadequate training of teachers to teach in an outcomes-based manner and the lack of financial resources to train these teachers efficiently and effectively are probably the most important. Gratefully there are also solutions to these problems. The essence of these solutions is that the curriculum must be indigenous rather than imported (making it easier to train teachers to implement the new curriculum) and that a long term implementation strategy involving a series of smaller steps needs to be devised, all of which needs to be developed and researched according to a systematic and long term framework (giving therefore more time to train teachers effectively).

Another problem is the growing concern that the standards in educational provision will fall. However, one of the key aims of OBE is the achievement of high standards by all learners in reaching high-quality outcomes. The introduction of OBE, however, is not the only reason for the acute concern about quality in education currently experienced in South Africa. Beside the inequalities found in South African schools due to the legacy of apartheid, the school system is still dominated by a phenomenon often referred to as the collapse of a culture of teaching and learning. A plethora of private colleges and schools have emerged which has created an additional need to ensure that educational institutions, educational practices and qualifications meet national and international criteria. In this respect, an effective system of quality assurance was introduced through new policy and legislation.

The Chisholm Report touches upon another problem issue when concluded that a shared vision alone does not guarantee the successful implementation of the OBE model and improvement in the quality of education. Systematic paradigm shifts require a fundamental change to the old order. This necessitates the retraining of teachers and the provision of materials that could contribute

substantially to the formulation of a shared South African vision. Due to the legacy of apartheid, many schools in South Africa still provide education of a rather poor quality. Most of the historically Black schools in the former Independent States are under-resourced and their teachers under-trained. These schools are lacking the capacity to implement the OBE model successfully.

It must be stressed at this point that the important roles of both the South African teacher and the learner in impacting and assuring quality in the classroom are crucial and must never be underestimated, non-withstanding the fact that an OBE model is in place or not. As Clarke put it: *“Learners must share the vision of quality performance with their teachers.”* Consistent with this goal is the strategy of involving teachers and learners in identifying the characteristics of quality. If all are not involved and in agreement with the strategies of teaching and learning, quality in the classroom (and school) will certainly be very hard to achieve.

In South Africa there is, however, a lack of responsibility, dedication and commitment on the part of many teachers and learners. Therefore, achieving the required knowledge, skills and habits of mind to promote a prosperous and democratic country with a quality education system will take some very hard work from a number of key players. Learners will have to take greater responsibility for their learning. Teachers will have to take full responsibility for careful planning and management of their learners’ learning environment. Parents will have to be more involved in motivating and facilitating their children to learn.

Changes to modes of teaching go hand-in-hand with curriculum development. This is why, with the introduction of Curriculum 2005 and the particular style of OBE being implemented in South Africa, the time has never been better to improve the mode and style of teaching in South African schools. Left to their own devices, learners will often struggle to succeed if not assisted by a dedicated and competent teacher. Shavelson put this issue very simply when he stated, *“what is taught and the way it is taught in the classroom influences the quality of education at school level”* .

One of the attractions of the OBE model is that it provides administrators with some level of control over the outcomes of education and, at the same time, provides teachers with a large degree of freedom to select content and methods through which they will have their learners achieve those outcomes. In order to implement OBE meaningfully in South Africa, a balance need to be achieved between these two aspects.

South African learners have their life-chances determined by their ability to 'cope' at school. The majority of them, however, are excluded from the mainstream of social and economic life. If a change in the curriculum, especially in the social and cultural underpinning thereof, can improve the quality of education and thus improve the chances of these under-privileged learners, should South Africans not be brave enough to embrace this change that will hopefully transforms education and therefore their chances for academic success? It is time for South Africans to change this situation. I believe that they have the will to do so and with the introduction of the new curriculum, the time has never been better.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

What might be the immediate way forward for Curriculum 2005? It should be to continue with implementation of the OBE model, but shift the attention from outcomes to learner-centered education, focusing on knowledge of learners, methods of teaching and classroom management, as well as the training of teachers to implement the new curriculum. Although Spady and others believe that the concept of outcomes-based education is nothing new and has been with us since time immemorial, it is changing South African education drastically. Classroom teaching, assessment of achievement, learner advancement, the placement of learners and learning support materials are all heading for fundamental change. It places enormous demands on teachers to further individualize instruction, plan remediation and enrichment, administer diagnostic assessment and keep extensive

records. Outcomes-based education will founder if there is not appropriate high quality staff development and the provision of sufficient support.

Coinciding with renewal in classroom management, school management will have to be adjusted radically. To make OBE successful, schools need to be substantially reorganized. Consequently the role of the parent in education will also have to be adjusted. The successful implementation of OBE in South Africa depends on informed and motivated communities. For this reason, teachers, parents and educational managers should be familiarized with all facets of this approach. Knowledge is vital at this stage. The new curriculum endorses the concept of lifelong learning. This means that all people who need to learn can now be given a chance to learn. The vision of the changed education system is thus that all people be granted the opportunity to develop their potential to the full. The new system must therefore both be people-centered as well as success-orientated. South Africa finds itself in a competitive world in which increasing importance is assigned to the development of knowledge and skills. Consequently great emphasis has been placed in recent times on the provision of quality education since the latter is an indispensable prerequisite for development. The implementation of Curriculum 2005 and the OBE model presents a unique opportunity for systematic change and the improvement of quality in South African education. It is doubtful if any country has attempted as radical a change in so diverse a situation. South Africa is, in the best sense of the word, a world in one country. The new curriculum contains elements of almost any innovation that has ever been tried (education).

The successful and effective implementation of the OBE approach is arguably South Africa's fiercest education battle at the moment. The challenges for South Africans in this regard are enormous. Jansen and Christie refer to the implementation of the new curriculum as follows: "*This is a bold experiment indeed: nothing of its kind has ever been tried, on anywhere near this kind of scale, anywhere in the world*". Despite this challenge, an educational system that focuses on a more holistic, context-appropriate set of outcomes is possibly the cure for what ails South Africa's education system and is possibly the right thing at the right time to improve the quality of South

African education and transforms the South African education system. OBE can, if given the chance, let to the empowerment of a still disenfranchised and marginalized South African society. Only time will tell whether or not this approach was the correct one to follow.

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